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The power of Henry Waxman's gavel and questions

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Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Congressman Henry Waxman retires this year, after four decades on Capitol Hill. He says he's ready to begin "the next chapter" of his life.

The race is on to succeed **L.A. Congressman Henry Waxman, who announced Thursday he will retire** (<http://www.scpr.org/news/2014/01/30/41894/rep-henry-waxman-announces-retirement-from-congres/>) at the end of his current 20th term. **State Senator Ted Lieu** (<http://www.scpr.org/blogs/politics/2014/01/31/15741/ted-lieu-announces-run-for-congress-with-high-prof/>) and former **L.A. City Controller Wendy Greuel** (<http://www.scpr.org/blogs/politics/2014/01/30/15732/gruel-will-run-for-waxman-s-seat/>) are already declared candidates, and others are said to be mulling a run.

But whoever wins will have some big shoes to fill when you consider Waxman's legislative legacy.

In 1994, Waxman asked a simple question of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company CEO James Johnston: "How many people die each year from smoking cigarettes?"

Waxman had summoned seven tobacco company CEOs to testify before the congressional subcommittee he chaired. It was an historic moment. These titans of tobacco had never been called to account for the death toll of their products.

"I do not know how many," Johnston said (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ebk2QTTQgg>) .

"You disagree with the Surgeon General's opinion?" Waxman shot back. The Surgeon General had estimated 435,000 people died annually. Johnston, sitting at the witness table below Waxman, struggled to explain himself.

"It is a computer generated number that makes assumptions."

Clearly annoyed, Waxman, who chaired the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, interrupted: "Mr. Johnston, I am going to have to ask you to respond to my questions."

Sure enough, as **the diminutive congressman from West Los Angeles** (<http://waxman.house.gov/bio>) had warned earlier, "This is not going to be an easy day."

Some called Waxman — who stands just 5'5" — "The Inquisitor." Others said he was the scariest man in Washington. But for all the show of his hearings,

which including grilling professional baseball players about steroids, Waxman actually played a key role in passing a slew of important legislation during his 40 years in the U.S. House of Representatives.

“Of course he is a liberal Democrat,” said **Raphael Sonenshein, executive director of the Pat Brown Institute at Cal State L.A.** (<http://www.patbrowninstitute.org/about/staff.php>) “But he also wanted to get things done.”

Waxman was instrumental in expanding Medicaid, establishing the Children's Health Insurance Program, and passing the Ryan White Care Act, which allocated federal money for treatment of people with H.I.V. and AIDS. He was a driving force behind ObamaCare and legislation to drastically cut carbon emissions.

Conservative Republicans loathed him. But Waxman also won the respect of many who disagreed with his agenda.

“He was a man who stood by his guns and had a razor sharp political sense,” said **Scott Segal, an energy industry lobbyist with Bracewell & Giuliani** (<http://www.bracewellgiuliani.com/people/scott-h-segal>) . “But he tried to make his initiatives bi-partisan and attempt to cut a deal.”

Segal, who attended or testified at dozens of Waxman's hearings, recalls the congressman's work on the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments that addressed acid rain-causing power plant emissions. Much of the work was done in Waxman's subcommittee. The legislation won overwhelming support from Democrats and Republicans.

That's doesn't happen much in today's hyper-partisan atmosphere, as Waxman told the New York Times. “It's been frustrating because of the extremism of Tea Party Republicans,” he said. “Nothing seems to be happening.”

Waxman, who holds a law degree from UCLA, also had a “very smart staff,” Sonenshein said. “He was extremely well-prepared.”

Some of Waxman's power derived from his West L.A. district – one of the wealthiest in the county. Each election cycle, Waxman, who lives in Beverly Hills, would raise hundreds of thousands of dollars. But he never faced much opposition.

“He hardly needed much of that money himself,” Sonenshein said. “So he would spread it out among his Democratic colleagues on Capitol Hill, who desperately needed campaign money.”

That helped him win committee chairmanships.

He faced his stiffest opposition in the 2012 election, when independent Bill Bloomfield, a wealthy businessman, spent more than \$7 million challenging Waxman. The result was a 54-46 percent victory — Waxman's narrowest win ever.

Waxman, 74, has been a central figure in Democratic Party politics in Southern California. He teamed with former Congressman Howard Berman when both were in the California legislature to form what some called the “Waxman-Berman” machine. They would funnel support to candidates of their liking. They created the L.A. County Young Democrats.

Now, there's a scramble to succeed Waxman. (<http://www.scpr.org/blogs/politics/2014/01/31/15741/ted-lieu-announces-run-for-congress-with-high-prof/>)

But it was his time atop Congressional committees that people may remember best. One infamous exchange in 2008 featured fellow California Representative Darrell Issa, a Republican, attempting to stop Waxman from questioning President Bush's Environmental Protection Agency administrator. It was at a hearing of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, which Waxman chaired at the time.

Issa kept pestering Waxman, citing arcane House rules. Finally, Waxman slammed down the gavel – six times the wooden mallet echoed throughout the chamber.

“I will have you physically removed from this meeting if you don't stop,” Waxman said to Issa. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr3HuRZFbfk>)

Then he turned to the EPA administrator.

“I want to know an answer to the question.”



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